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Iran testimony by 3 CIA aides is criticized

By Jeff McConnell
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Secret testimony given before the Iran-contra committees by three key CIA officials is expected to be released as early as today, but several committee staffers say the full story of the CIA's involvement in the affair may never be known.

The staff members blame the problem in part on a lack of time for questioning the three CIA officials and on contradictory and incomplete testimony, committee sources said.

The three, identified as Duane (Dewey) Clarridge, Clair George and Alan Fiers, appeared during executive session Aug. 4 through Aug. 6, soon after the committees ended their public hearings. The transcripts of their testimony have been reviewed by the administration for classified material. An edited version of Clarridge's remarks is expected to be made public today. The testimony of the other two is expected to be released soon.

Committee staffers have expressed disappointment at the questioning earlier this month of the three officials, which the panel aides said lacked depth. With three witnesses in three days and many of the 26 congressmen on the two committees wanting to ask questions, the panel members limited the examination by committee counsels to two hours per witness.

The committees reportedly were unable to explore conflicts between the testimony of Fiers and of Lt. Col. Oliver L. North, the former National Security Council aide and a key figure in the affair.

Notebooks provided to the panel by North "talk a great deal about Fiers" and about his alleged role in the effort to provide military assistance to the contras, according to one source.

Early deposition

The committees took a deposition from Fiers before panel members saw the notebooks, a committee source said. "We originally deposed Fiers without knowing any of this," he said. "If we had, we could have asked many more specific questions."

The source said Fiers' appearance was too brief to explore all of the questions raised by North's notebooks.

Fiers was the chief of the CIA's Central America task force from 1984 to 1986, when US military assistance to the contras was prohibited by law. He served on an inter-agency panel that included North and Elliott Abrams, the assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs. The task force coordinated United States policy toward the contras during the time when funding was outlawed.

In his testimony, Fiers reportedly said he only suspected that North was providing military aid to the contras during the ban and had limited knowledge of the role of Joe Fernandez, the former CIA station chief in Costa Rica.

By contrast, North has said he discussed his activities with Fiers. Fernandez has testified that he kept Fiers informed.

The panel members do not expect to resolve the contradictions in their final report, which is expected by October, a source said this week.

There are other conflicts regarding the role of CIA officials that could go unresolved in the committee report, sources said. These involve testimony provided by Clarridge, the CIA's chief of counterterrorism, and George, the head of covert operations and Clarridge's superior.

Both men reportedly denied knowing that a November 1985 Israeli shipment to Iran, which Clarridge aided, contained Hawk anti-aircraft missiles. Clarridge's testimony contradicts that of subordinates who said he received a cable describing the shipment.

At the time, the CIA acted without legal authority. A retroactive "finding" later was signed by President Reagan to authorize the CIA action.

Casey role

Questions remain about the involvement of the late CIA director, William J. Casey. North testified that he and Casey discussed all aspects of North's Iran-contra activities, including the diversion of

Iranian arms-sales profits to the Nicaraguan contras.

North testified that it was Casey's idea to recruit Maj. Gen. Richard V. Secord, the retired Army officer, in 1984 to assist in supplying the contras with arms after the congressional ban on US aid took effect. North did not indicate why Casey chose Secord.

Secord's testimony and documents released by the committees suggest that on two occasions there were reversals after Casey had placed restrictions on Fernandez's efforts to aid the contras. The record does not explain why the reversals occurred or who in the CIA was aware of them.

Committee sources indicated that although these and other questions about Casey were raised, the testimony of Fiers, George and Clarridge did little to resolve them.

The New York Times reported last week that some panel members made a conscious effort to limit embarrassment to the CIA. The Times quoted panelists as saying they hoped to avoid the experience of the mid-1970s, when revelations about improper activities led to low morale at the CIA.

In addition, the Senate committee chairman, Daniel K. Inouye of Hawaii, said the panels had decided against hearing public testimony from Robert M. Gates, the deputy CIA director, to spare the agency potential embarrassment.